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Complaints From El Salvador

By David DeVoss

For five years, the people of El Salvador have had a ringside seat from which to watch how the American press operates when covering a controversial war. This daily contact with American reporters—both as readers or viewers and as sources of their stories—has produced many U.S. press critics in El Salvador.

Since 1981, when Secretary of State Alexander Haig made the survival of El Salvador a national security priority for the United States, no other developing country has been more thoroughly analyzed by the U.S. press than Central America's smallest and most densely populated nation. Nearly 500 reporters each year receive credentials from the Salvador Press Corps Association, the organization American correspondents created to accredit their peers. The resulting stories and broadcasts have made educated Salvadorans aware of the ways in which news is gathered and disseminated in the United States.

There is no shortage of foreign news in the capital city of San Salvador. Airfreighted editions of the *Miami Herald* and the *New York Times* are available from newsstands at the major hotels. At night, the Voice of America can be heard on four separate frequencies. Political reports by U.S. correspondents often are discussed on the editorial pages of the country's two largest newspapers, and analytical pieces occasionally are reprinted verbatim by the English-language *News-Gazette*. In upper-class suburbs such as San Benito, where video rooms and heavily armed security guards are *de rigueur*, weekend dinner parties that used to end with the screening of rented comedy films now are more likely to conclude with the showing of a bootleg copy of a PBS documentary. What cannot be tuned in or subscribed to can be overheard at the Camino Real hotel, where many foreign journalists work and live.

Salvadorans are not ambivalent toward American press coverage of their country. Political extremists are especially critical. Guerrilla commandantes argue that stories by U.S. correspondents too often contain Washington propaganda. Conservatives are equally vociferous in their claim that U.S. publications naively describe guerrillas as "rebels" when, in fact, they are communist terrorists. Supporters of Roberto d'Aubuisson, the founder and defeated presidential candidate of the ultra-right National Republican Alliance (ARENA), summed up their feelings prior to the national election last March in a succinctly worded bumper sticker: "Journalist—surrender your country, not mine—Tell the truth."

Politically moderate Salvadorans, who long ago learned that compromise seldom makes page one, believe their narrow but increasingly important slice of the political spectrum merits more U.S. press attention. But some, like Luis Andreu Ruiz, who heads El Salvador's Port Authority, subscribe to a "no news is good news" philosophy. "Some cynics here will argue that the best thing that happened in 1984 was the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the Ethiopian famine. It was wonderful not to be news for a few months," says this M.I.T. graduate. (Because of U.S. interest and involvement in this war, it is no accident that many officers of the government and some rebel spokesmen, specifically in the Democratic Revolutionary Front, have been educated abroad and speak perfect English.)

El Salvador's civil war, now entering its sixth year, will continue to be news. But in pursuit of the larger military story, reporters who ignore the political center ignore the sector of Salvadoran society that in large measure will determine the scope of the country's postwar future.

Do Salvadorans believe U.S. press coverage of El Salvador's bloody struggles has been fair? Do they believe the U.S. reporting of Washington's first real "proxy war" has been accurate? To answer these questions, I recently returned to El Salvador, where I had worked for a year in 1983-84 as *Time* magazine's correspondent and bureau chief. Ignoring the predictable bias of extremist leaders, I sought out instead moderate politicians, technocrats and professionals who remained in El Salvador after the oligarchy withdrew $1.2 billion in bank deposits and moved to Miami in the early 1980s.

One of the few things on which people agree in the polarized society of El Salvador is the inadequate coverage of the war's early years. "During the first junta, most of the journalists here were free-lancers whose money came from very mysterious sources," remembers President José Napoleon Duarte, a media-wise alumnus of Notre Dame who was robbed of the presidency in 1972 in part because of indifferent U.S. press coverage of the fraudulent vote count (and therefore no international indignation at the stolen election). "One man who claimed to represent a Sacramento radio station went two years without filing a story," Duarte says. "Those looking for sensationalism had no problem finding it. This country had no experience with a free press. Officials didn't know how to act and the army was suspicious."

Several factors contributed to the spotty early coverage. Few of the American journalists covering the war in the early years had previous overseas experience and all wire service copy was written by local stringers. Experienced foreign

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" 'Much of the responsibility lies with the Air Force,' said the office's director, Maria Julia Hernandez. 'These [victims] are children, women, old people. I'm not talking about guerrillas.' "

The *New York Times*, in contrast, has become more cautious in its sourcing. In a September 9 story on Los Llanitos, a mountain village where residents claim 68 unarmed civilians were killed last July by the Salvadoran army, James LeMoyne qualified much of the information received:

"The villagers' account has not been confirmed, and it may be colored by their sympathies for the guerrillas. But a report last month by the Salvadoran Roman Catholic Church Legal Aid Office supported their charges, and José Napoleon Duarte, who has staked his presidency on ending human rights abuses here, last week ordered an investigation of the charges. It is the first time President Duarte has initiated an inquiry into a recently reported mass slaying."

U.S. publications differ in their use of and confidence in Salvador's human rights organizations. In stories filed by Chris Hedges, the *Christian Science Monitor* used without reservation information from Tutela Legal, "whose statistics are widely regarded as reputable." The *Wall Street Journal*, on the other hand, dismissed such organizations as credible sources in a February 10 "Americas" column by Editor David Asman:

"When White House spokesman Larry Speakes not long ago said that 'perhaps 40%' of the killings in [Salvador] were being committed by leftists, it brought an immediate outcry. A Jan. 13 Associated Press story quoted numbers provided by 'human-rights' sources suggesting that about 80% of the 'political murders' . . . had been the work of 'government security forces and right-wing death squads.' Furthermore, the human-rights group estimated the number of political murders at 500 a month for the last six months of 1983. That doesn't even come close to the U.S. government's estimate of 100 such killings a month during the same period.

"These conflicting numbers raise several questions crucial to the Salvadoran debate: Where exactly do these figures come from, how are they verified, and how much reliance can be placed on their accuracy? A close examination suggests they be viewed with a great deal of skepticism. . . . "

The U.S. embassy's salvo aimed at the human rights groups came in the form of a February 1984 embassy memo questioning the accuracy of the archbishop's legal affairs office. Only the *Christian Science Monitor* covered the report, but its February 14, 1984, story was a long defense of the organization that appeared under the headline "US distorting Salvador rights picture?" Following the release of another, more detailed embassy report last August, however, press skepticism began to grow.

On August 19, a story by McCartney in the *Post* said the archbishop's legal affairs office had vastly overestimated civilian deaths resulting from a controversial army operation in December 1983. One month later, a report by Dan Williams in the *Los Angeles Times*, headlined "Keeping Tally of Salvador Deaths Is No Longer an Easy Task," finally accused the office of bias because of its assumption that every "guerrilla" listed as killed by the army was in fact a civilian.

From December 1983, when Vice President George Bush went to El Salvador carrying a letter from President Reagan demanding the expulsion of certain army officers linked with death squads, until June 1984, when José Napoleon Duarte was inaugurated as El Salvador's first democratically elected president in 50 years, the biggest story for U.S. reporters covering El Salvador was the death squads. For Salvadoran jurists and military officers it also marked a period when U.S. journalists violated normally established procedures for dealing with unproved allegations by publishing names of military officers suspected of supporting the country's death squads.

"It is true that many of the people named were guilty of abuses, but some of the named did not belong in print," insists Colonel Sigifredo Ochoa Perez. As the lists of "tainted" officers grew, advisers in the U.S. embassy's military assistance section complained that it was unfair to hold their Salvadoran colleagues responsible for violations they may have known about since the tradition among Salvador's military officers is to protect fellow officers in their military graduating class, or *tanda*. This view contrasted with that of the country's jurists.

"From a strictly legal point of view, many of the names used in the death squad articles should not have been used," says Ricardo Castenada, a prominent Salvadoran attorney presently assigned to restructure his country's antiquated judicial code. "But I like what came out of it. After the articles appeared most of the killing stopped. Our oligarchy believed it was above criticism. Without the American press this country might never have changed."

The amount of proof necessary to accuse a person of a human rights violation is a question still unresolved. In a December 1983 article for the *New Republic*, Christopher Dickey placed the phenomenon in historical context. The coercion and terror carried out by ORDEN, the state intelligence gathering network that flourished prior to the 1979 coup, were well documented by Dickey and he named the men who administered ORDEN. The assassinations of American nuns, labor organizers and a journalist that he wrote about were beyond dispute. He named the men in charge of the army units suspected of carrying out the crimes. In a jointly researched series of articles appearing about the same time, Laurie Becklund of the *Los Angeles Times* and Craig Pyes, then of the *Albuquerque Journal*, were able to tie, through extensive interviews of those involved, officers in ORDEN and other intelligence organizations to politically active oligarchs in Salvador and Guatemala.

But as leaks from official sources increased, much of the sourcing became less precise. A May 8, 1984, story by Dennis Volman in the *Christian Science Monitor* linked the CIA to the death squads on the basis of an unattributed interview with "a politically conservative, very prominent Salvadoran civilian, widely respected for his moral probity."

"How absurd you Americans are," this unnamed civilian source remarked to Volman. "With the one hand you send your vice-president here to control the death squads and with the other you participate in them." In support of this serious charge, the *Monitor* offered only the revelation that the CIA helped organize and initially train the Salvadoran National Intelligence Agency (ANI) and intelligence departments of the army general staff. Left unanswered was the question of whether paying a man for information, as the CIA apparently did with Treasury Police Chief Nicolas Carranza, made the agency responsible for actions taken by Carranza and the 1,800 men under his command.

Although many Salvadoran academics believe that reporting of human rights violations in the U.S. press created the international pressure that eventually forced the military to accept reform, some of them believe the U.S. government, not reporters, deserve most of the credit.

"Why did the death squads become a major story only after the Bush [December 1983] visit and not back in 1981-82, when their activities were the most intense?" asks Ricardo Stein, a University of Central America demographer. "The timing, scope and direction of that story was directed, via leaks of certain names, by the U.S. government."

Stein believes the U.S. press corps in El Salvador has failed to provide investigative reporting: "There is a tendency in American journalism to provide background rather than context and, because of this, 80 percent of the dispatches from here ignore the real story. Why, for example, didn't anyone do some investigating last year when the Pentagon made Salvador pay $2 million for $800,000 Medivac helicopters that weren't even new? A

plane crashed into a volcano killing four CIA agents. It could have been an opportunity to explain how the CIA functions here, but nothing beyond the basic details of the crash was published."

Among other problems they face, U.S. reporters in El Salvador must cope with attempts to manipulate press coverage of the war from all sides—including from the American embassy.

Embassy public affairs officer Don Hamilton, a former photographer for the *Tulsa World*, openly takes credit for managing the news. "Everybody tries to use the press," he says. "If the guerrillas can do it, why not the U.S. government?"

It is only natural that the news flow from Salvador reflects the priorities set by Washington, says Hamilton. "Journalists and diplomats are both bright, aggressive people who want to influence events. They grew up in similar neighborhoods and often went to the same schools. On any given day you could switch all the people at the U.S. embassy and the [reporters in the] Camino Real and I bet the cables and dispatches would read more or less the same."

The Salvadoran military has been less successful in its efforts to influence American correspondents. Lieutenant Colonel Ricardo Cienfuegos, the director of the Armed Forces Press Committee, universally known by its Spanish acronym, COPREFA, is supposed to facilitate coverage of the war, but given the lingering hostility of the Salvadoran officer corps toward the U.S. press (and vice versa), his task is nearly impossible.

"We do not have barriers, we have categories," Cienfuegos says. "All of the foreign journalists we register are sorted into four categories. Professionals, Romantics, Free-lancers and the Totally Biased. When you think of the press corps this way there are fewer reporters to worry about."

Compared with the rest of El Salvador's military, Cienfuegos could almost be considered a liberal. But too many lost battles with U.S. journalists and his stonewalling superiors have left the colonel frustrated.

"Last March, the terrorists machine-gunned a train 40 miles north of San Salvador and killed 12 *campesinos*," he explains. "It was a passenger train that also carried a bit of cement and fuel, plus several Treasury Police in the very last car. The terrorists murdered innocent civilians, but the story that resulted had them caught in the middle of a fight and killed. That's not honest, from my point of view."

COPREFA complains that Salvador's guerrillas are portrayed as Robin Hoods by American journalists. Government soldiers emerge from the same stories either as incompetent bullies or pessimistic draftees. U.S. correspondents in El Salvador, however, claim that precise images of insurgents are impossible to draw because they are such a diverse group.

For example, a November 28, 1983, *Miami Herald* story by Sam Dillon describes the average *combatiente* in the northern province of San Miguel as a battle-savvy teenager capable of cold, calculating ferocity:

"The profile that emerged is one of an experienced force of peasant youths, the majority of them fighting in provinces where they have family roots. A large percentage said they had close relatives in the rebel ranks, reflecting the guerrillas' family-targeted recruiting efforts."

But in a January 13, 1984, profile of the town of Jucuaran, in the southern province of Usulutan, the *New York Times*' Stephen Kinzer found flashes of contrasting, fastidious bravado in the rebels guarding the city:

"The truck pulled to the side of the rock-strewn path today when a jeep carrying a guerrilla patrol appeared. . . . The jeep that carried the patrol was given to the Salvadoran government by the United States Agency for International Development and was stolen at a guerrilla roadblock on the coastal highway last month. Two weeks ago, the rebels left a note at a Government office offering to return the truck in exchange for 100 pairs of boots, 40 shirts and 40 pairs of pants. The note specified sizes, colors and brand names."

If there is a bias among U.S. journalists, concludes UPI's El Salvador bureau chief, Michael Drudge, it is against the army's stonewalling attitude. "If the FMLN received the benefit of the doubt early in the war it was because their broadcasts on Radio Venceremos featured fairly accurate battle accounts. The Salvadoran army, though more open than before, is still thin-skinned, distrustful of our intentions and largely unavailable for comment. I guess these barriers get reflected in our stories."

Although the war continues, Salvador's leaders believe their country has improved along with the quality of U.S. reporting. "Five years ago, nobody in this country knew about press freedom," says Duarte. "But we learned. The presence of the American press has helped make the better country we have today." ●